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ABSTRACT

A number of problems may arise when university-based researchers conduct research in public school districts. Administrators may be suspicious about the value of research activities unless they are given an accurate understanding of its outcomes and benefits. Those conducting research in school systems must ask themselves a number of questions concerning such areas as teacher role in the research program and participation in setting its goals, student participation and its effect on students, and how the results will be used and disseminated. For successful research efforts to take place, the researcher must first gain acceptance in the system, there must be a logical consistency between research stages, and the researcher must collaborate with school district personnel. Research activities will be questioned unless they are useful to the school district. It is especially important to protect the rights of students who participate in research studies. Unless researchers develop guidelines that balance the right to privacy and the need for research, society will endeavor to bring this balance about on its own terms. (Author/JM)

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CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN SCHOOL SYSTEMS --
CONFESSIONS OF A COLLEGE DEAN

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for

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Introduction

I am delighted to participate in a symposium on Cooperative Research Efforts--Problems and Potential, particularly when I consider the useful data cooperative research accumulates for decision-makers. The current activity of a number of university people poses several questions for those of us engaged in research, as well as those of us who work in settings where the research is conducted. One such question that interests me is What principles should guide the activity of those conducting research in public school districts?

I intend to discuss some of the inherent problems of conducting research in school systems, but I will not try to review all the problems associated with a research activity in which university and school district personnel interact. I am not presenting a research paper, to the degree that I do not offer data to support my remarks. I will instead rely upon you to recall data from your objective and subjective experience to support or refute my arguments.

The Context

Educational administrators have let themselves be forced into a situation in which the public now demands of them certain definite educational behavior. That is, the public is searching for answers to the myriad problems that present beset the operation and management of schools, and that public looks instinctively to the administrators. What is the

nature of their urgency? Erosion of community support, rapid and unexpected change, growing financial burdens, distorted priorities, and concern for rapidly worsening social problems for which the schools are perceived as significantly responsible--all of these and more contribute to the current demand for answers for what is known as "educational accountability."¹ The research concern has increased considerably with this hunger for accountability and this sudden sport of research and the data it is beginning to provide have not been uniformly welcomed by school officials.

Too many administrators view research activity a superficial gimmick, conducted without careful consideration of its influences. In other words, educators spend little time analyzing the research; nevertheless they often oppose the activity itself. This failure to recognize the strengths and limitations of research and the usefulness of its accompanying activity contributes to both the lack of trust for the researchers as well as to a continuing strain in the relationship between school districts and the universities. On the other hand, the failure of school districts to set forth clear operational procedures to be followed by those who want to conduct research in those districts tends to produce confusion and unhappiness among the school personnel.

The point is, practitioners must have an understanding of the expected outcomes for a given research activity, and school district personnel must have some understanding of what benefits will accrue to the district as a result of a given research effort. Unarticulated good intentions do not suffice. In fact, good intentions cannot

substitute for a careful critique of the proposed research activity and a determination of its potential impact on the school system involved. Surprisingly, it is this element that educational administrators frequently fail to consider. Indiscriminate research projects conducted by university personnel can also produce a misapplication of research results. But a discriminating use of the research results obtained from studies conducted collaboratively in school systems can save educators time and effort.

As you know, each research project combines unique strengths and weaknesses, and virtually none will provide data that cures all, or even many, of the problems that confront educational organizations. Therefore, to avoid disillusionment, educators should not be encouraged to foster unrealistic expectations. The difficulties associated with conducting research in school systems by university personnel, or anyone else for that matter, should be understood prior to the decision to start a given project.

Twenty Critical Questions

Hostility to research conducted in school districts emerges either from painful experience or from the growing body of critical literature. I suggested twenty questions for those planning to conduct research in public schools, and I believe all twenty apply to anyone planning such research:

First, what opportunities have teachers had to contribute to the determination of the problems and procedures to be employed in the project?

Second, does that teacher opinion demonstrate influence?

Third, is participation in the research optional or mandatory?

Fourth, who else in the school or system is participating?

Fifth, do students and their parents have a choice about participation?

Sixth, if it is desired, how can anonymity be guaranteed?

Seventh, what will teachers be expected to do?

Eighth, how much time and extra work will be required?

Ninth, how often will the research interrupt the teachers' routines?

Tenth, what, if any, are the anticipated effects of the research on students?

Eleventh, what will the students have to do?

Twelfth, what inconveniences will the research cause?

Thirteenth, "what's in it for me?" (Who gets the recognition, publicity, or remuneration?)

Fourteenth, what are the expected benefits to the school system?

Fifteenth, what advance description of the project have the teachers received?

Sixteenth, what opportunity have the teachers had to question the researchers?

Seventeenth, what happens to the results of the study?

Eighteenth, how will the administration use the results?

Nineteenth, who in the school district takes responsibility for using the research?

Twentieth, who will take the responsibility for disseminating the results of the research?

The central idea throughout these twenty questions is that researchers entering our public school systems must anticipate the steps to be taken by both themselves and the school system if the activity is to avoid hostility.

Common Causes of Failure

For his part, the educational administrator should also be aware of the three basic reasons why research activities take place. Researchers into organizational change strategies have discovered that, apart from their failure to achieve desired results, less successful endeavors to exhibit three patterns of inconsistency. These patterns of inconsistency can be phrased positively this way:

First, to be successful, a researcher must first gain acceptance in the system. This acceptance will reduce confusion among the school personnel.

Second, successful research incorporates a logical consistency between the research stages. When problems arise during a study frequently, it is often because wide, illogical gaps appears in the implementation sequence.

Third, successful studies use a shared approach -- researchers work collaboratively with the school district personnel.

I have become more and more convinced that school administrators will almost automatically question the use of their school systems as research laboratories unless these studies produce some utility for the school

district. The distinction between basic and applied research is frequently raised as a way of questioning those who expect research to provide some resolution of the problems affecting the management and operation of educational organizations and to solidify educational policies and practices. Although such a distinction may help those of us in academia, its artificiality has been exposed by James P. Shaver in his comments regarding a January, 1977, article by Kerlinger² in the Educational Researcher entitled "The Influence of Research on Education Practice."

Another concern school district officials raise is that many researchers depart as soon as they complete their study without making school district officials aware of the implications of their findings. Moreover, little if any attention has traditionally been paid to providing school district personnel with the training necessary to conduct research collaboratively with or independently of university personnel.

The officials, of course, rightly insist that care be taken to protect the rights of students who participate as research subjects. To avoid potential problems in this area, researchers must take those steps that ensure that the rights not only of the students, but of their parents, and the school district as well stay protected. This protection includes freedom from treatment or experimentation without informed consent. The basic elements of informed consent under these regulations include

1. A fair explanation of procedures to be followed and their purposes, including the identification of any procedures that are experimental.

2. A description of any attendant discomforts and risks reasonably to be expected.
3. A description of any benefits reasonably to be expected.
4. A disclosure of any appropriate alternative procedures that might be advantageous to the participant.
5. An offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedures.
6. The advice that the subject is free, without prejudice, to withdraw his consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time.³

Perhaps the issue that will continue to bedevil educational researchers arises in the tension between an educator's need to know and an individual's right of privacy. If educators are expected to carry out their duties as professionals they must have access to the information they need. On the other hand, such a need must not jeopardize neither the student's academic life nor his social well being. What specific student information falls within an educator's right to know remains problematic, this need to know constantly threatens to erode the right of privacy in the schools.

Conclusion

I agree with Bryce Anderson that the annals of educational research are filled with examples of research whose usefulness can be questioned. As Anderson says,

Researchers must clarify the nature of their work. Fundamental research designed to generate new knowledge is unlikely to deliver evidence directly applicable to a [debate over educational policy], let alone a neat package of information to guide value choices. On the other hand, applied research targeted on a specific situation or set of problems in education may have limited use in providing generalizable knowledge.⁴

If university researchers want to gain the confidence of school officials and their support in educational research, the following principles will help:

First, think systematically about education and educational research.

Second, acknowledge the concept of limits.

Third, develop better ways to set research priorities.

Fourth, increase the utility of educational research for practitioners.

Fifth, improve the management and evaluation of educational research⁵ activities.

Sixth, protect the constitutional rights of research subjects.

Unless the advances of science are used with discrimination by scientists engaged in behavioral research--as well as by other professions . . . the constructive and productive uses of these advances may be drastically and unnecessarily restricted by a fearful community.⁶

The word I use to describe the future for educational researchers is "hazy." But this is certain: Until researchers develop guidelines which balance the right to privacy and the need for research, society will insist upon this balance and probably bring it about on its own terms. Thus, the research community should take the lead "through its own codes, its own attitudes, and its own behavior."⁷ Otherwise, the legislature and the courts, through statutes and judicial decisions, will go right on establishing guidelines for educational researchers, regardless of the rationality of those guidelines.

As technological innovation will continue to force educational researchers to prove that their actions do not invade an individual's legislative

and common law rights. This pressure will increase simply because society now finds itself caught in a struggle between an individual's right to privacy and the value this information has for society.

Notes

1. Charles A. Reich, The Greening of America (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970) p. 4-7.
2. Fred N. Kerlinger, "The Influence of Research on Education Practice," Educational Researcher, September, 1977.
3. Privacy Act of 1974, in Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45P Public Welfare, Part 1 to 99, Vol. (40), No. 50, pp. 98-109.
4. Bryce Anderson, "How Not to Let Your Board and Superintendent Be Hoodwinked by Research," The American School Board Journal.
5. David H. Florio, "Research and the Politics of Education," The Education Forum, May, 1978, p. 496.
6. Ruebhausen and Brim, "Privacy and Behavioral Research," Columbia Law Review, 65, 1965, p. 1194.
7. Ibid.